



***Sunday, May 17<sup>th</sup> 2009***

## ***Our Struggle for Hope***

*Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

**Romans 8:24-25 (ESV)**

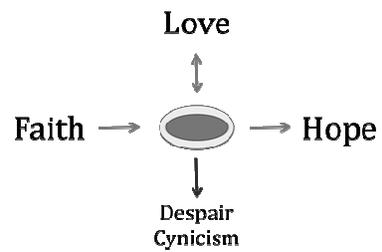


*Jacob's Well is a Christian Community which exists for the glory of God and the good of the city by extending hope through the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

## **My Notes**

### **Review—Cynical and Hope?**

### **Hope—What is It?**



### **Hope—How it is Lost?**

It can be misplaced...

## **Hope—How we do we fight for it?**

**Proverbs 24:13, 14** <sup>13</sup>My son, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste. <sup>14</sup>Know that wisdom is such to your soul; if you find it, there will be a future, and your hope will not be cut off.

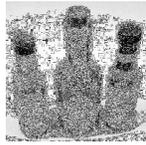
**Proverbs 9:10** <sup>10</sup>The **fear** of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the **knowledge** of the Holy One is insight.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Lucky Rocks or the Living God?

## **Community Meditation**

- In who or what do you place your deepest trust? What are the things you love the most in life? How is hope affected by these things?
- Read Romans chapter 8 in the New Testament. Hope is unrealized in a groaning creation that still contains suffering...yet we hope for redemption.
- What in your life/story needs to be redeemed?
- Have you seen Jesus give you hope in the past?
- Got questions? Drop them to us at [info@JacobsWellNJ.org](mailto:info@JacobsWellNJ.org)



**Extra Sauce** (the artist formerly known as the Junk Drawer)

## Building Life on Despair?

The British atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell coined an interesting phrase in his 1929 essay *A Free Man's Worship*; his idea was that future life must only be built on the firm foundation of *unyielding despair*. This thought came by way of his philosophical interpretations of science:

*Such, in outline, but even more purposeless, more void of meaning, is the world which Science presents for our belief. Amid such a world, if anywhere, our ideals henceforward must find a home. That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins -- all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, **only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair**, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.<sup>1</sup>*

Russell was writing in a time where he was rejecting belief in God amidst a society that had a long Christian tradition. It was natural for there to be a sense of despair for those who had long thought the God and human beings were the center of the universe's purpose. His idea is that we must come to grips with the truth that we live in a chaotic universe, which has no overarching meaning or purpose. All that exists is just matter and physical law...and nothing else. Once one greets this despair in a courageous manner, he can realize how wonderful humans are and get on with life.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche made similar commentary in his works. Nietzsche saw humans as being in need of a transition. They needed to move from acting as beasts in the herd to a few people becoming superior men: perfected, bold and completely unrestrained creatures. His view was that we must get over the infantile ideas about God and morality and will a greater future where a few great people rule the many. Nietzsche knew that the world would struggle to "live without God" and penned the following words in his parable *The Madman*:

*God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have*

*to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us--for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.<sup>2</sup>*

Whereas Russell would choose to nostalgically worship the human struggle for compassion in an empty world of despair, Nietzsche would recommend power. In either case, human beings would need to go through a gate of despair and confusion, in order to go to a higher history where hope is found in ourselves. There is only one problem with this project. When humanity looks into the mirror, he finds neither ultimate goodness nor a creature worthy of wielding ultimate power. So he lives perpetually afraid; his gods have become weak, they look very much like himself.

Though it is hard to persuade many otherwise, the history of human beings is not one of pure goodness accompanied by a benevolent wielding of power. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Human beings are quite capable of killing one another for a myriad of reasons and causes. Some do it in the name of religion, others political ideologies, and others for just plain greed and power. Some may love to retort that religion is the source of all intolerance and war. This is a specious claim that holds no reality. The fact is that human beings are the source of all intolerance and war and the non religious regimes of the 20th century are convincing proof that one does not need a "god" to pillage the world. The murderous reigns of Stalinist Russia, the cultural revolution in China and the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge prove that man needs not belief in a god to destroy his neighbor, he only needs to erroneously act like he is one.

Hope is difficult to build on a lie—and building hope on the reality of the goodness of human beings is a particularly hard thing to do. If the future belongs only to the whims of humanity and the torrents of nature, how can we have any confidence that things will go well. In fact, it is fear which rises when we realize that we are alone.

- Will some strange animal born virus destroy us?
- Will we destroy the environment and bring catastrophe on us all?
- Will we blow each other to bits over land and labor?
- Will we be hit by a mammoth asteroid and go the way of the dinosaur?
- Will some alien race drop in to destroy us?

In the naturalistic worldview of both Russell and Nietzsche, we are quite helpless in the face of such possibilities. It is but a posturing to think that hope can be built on yourself. Hope must aim towards the future, in a reality yet to come to pass. Yet the future is certainly unknown to us and it is far from under our control. What is our destiny both personally and corporately? The answers from the realms of unbelief are hardly encouraging. In fact, I believe they are filled with irrationality and dread.

The boastful unbeliever pokes at those who believe in God as if people of faith are somehow weaker and in need of a crutch for life. My contention is that God is not a crutch in the human quest for hope, but rather God is like legs for those who wish to run. When we ask human beings to find hope in the brute reality

matter/energy/space-time we send him on a perpetual goose chase, he will frenzy about but make little progress. He is running without legs.

When we speak of hope, we speak of the future. We speak of hope amidst a world of disease, death, war and despair. We speak in a strange tongue to those who only have hope for this life because our hope is not from ourselves, our goodness or our plans for the world. Our hope is in God, his goodness and his ways in the world. We desire to place our trust in God as he holds the future, knows our destiny and guides us today in our relationship to creation and one another. Hope comes to us as a gift and a virtue due to our relationship with the living creator God and his work in our lives. God has entered history, conquered death and given us new life in Jesus Christ. He is transforming us today, will transform our world and ultimately make all things new in the end.

### **On Virtues and Hope**

Our society and its intellectual forbearers historically focused on something called virtue. A virtue is a quality that makes something a good version of what it is. Take a knife as a simple example. A knife has certain virtues which make it a good knife. Sharpness would be a virtue for a knife according to its design. A virtue for a human being is a quality of character or quality of life that is typically a good thing. Vices would be qualities that are not so good.

Many thinkers have discussed character and virtue but none looms greater than the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle enumerated lists of moral and intellectual qualities that would be virtues for human beings and expounded upon these in his writings about the ethical life.<sup>3</sup> Historically, the Christian tradition has also focused heavily on the transformation of life and the cultivation of virtues. The work of the theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas built upon that of Aristotle in that he too saw that we possessed moral and intellectual qualities which should be understood to be virtuous. However, as a follower of Jesus and a reader of the New Testament, Thomas had much more to say. He added a discussion of what he called the *theological virtues*.

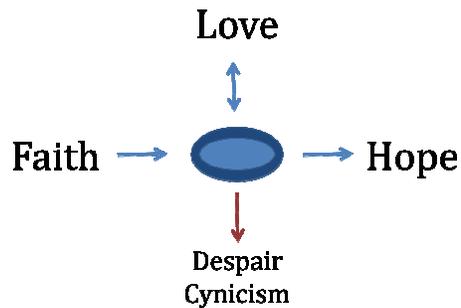
1 Corinthians 13 is a passage of the Christian Scriptures that is well known to many people. It is a poetic treatment of love (or charity) and its centrality in the life of those who follow Jesus. You may have heard this read at a wedding or seen it reduced to some Hallmark card type saying. The section actually ends with the following: *So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love* (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Aquinas saw these as unique theological virtues that emanate from the grace of God shown to human beings. Faith was our choosing to trust/assent to the gospel and the teachings of the Bible. Hope was the result of that faith in that we trust in God for our final happiness and joy. Finally, a love for God (and the corollary of loving one's neighbor made in his image) which comes from knowing him *as God* is the deepest foundation of our lives. Someday faith will be sight and hope will be realized in the Kingdom of Heaven, but love and relationship with God will remain forever. <sup>4</sup>

As a follower of Christ, hope is a virtue, but not one merely created by moral self effort. We do not muster up hope from within ourselves but rather hope comes

from trusting that God is in control of our lives and that he is loving towards his people. Such hope arises as we are given grace to believe and trust in Jesus' work on a cross to bring us into loving communion with the Father. Hope therefore is a by-product which is dependent upon the object of our faith. What we put our ultimate faith in, our trust in determines whether we live in enduring hope or fall into cynicism and despair.

The following diagram illustrates the relationship between faith, hope and love and how these are related to who/what is at the center of our lives.



When we place our *ultimate* trust in money, relationships, health, influence, status, etc. hope will languish if any of these are lost. Our future is not secure in any fashion when we place our *ultimate* trust in that which is unstable, fading and temporary. All of these things are good and can be received with thanksgiving, but if any are made the center of life, an empty soul will result. Life itself will ebb away as the looming inevitability of death consumes all, yet if God is at the center, our faith in him births perpetual hope. Though life and money and health and status may fade and oscillate we have in Christ a sure and steadfast anchor for the soul (See Hebrews 6:13-20).

As we traverse our lives we must not give in to the ideas that say we must build on the foreign tongue of unyielding despair to find safe habitat for the soul. Rather we find our home in God and we speak the language of hope to our world. Our message is that God is reconciling people to himself through Jesus Christ, a message of hope for all who will believe.

#### Notes

1. Bertrand Russell, A Free Man's Worship—available online at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1917russell-worship.html>
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, The Madman—available online at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/nietzsche-madman.html>
3. See Books II-VI of Aristotle, W. D. Ross, J. L. Ackrill, and J. O. Urmson. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford (Oxfordshire) ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
4. A summary of Thomas' moral philosophy and the theological virtues may be found here: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/aq-moral.htm>

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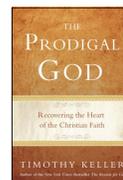


[www.JacobsWellNJ.org](http://www.JacobsWellNJ.org)

## For the Fam...

### *Welcome*

If today is your first time at Jacob's Well we want to extend to you a warm welcome. Make sure to fill out an info card and pick up a welcome pack with some basic information about our new church. We also have a free book for you as a gift from the Jacob's Well family.



### *Summer Series at the Days —Cynical Hope*

*Join us this summer at Jacob's Well as we seek an enduring hope...*



**April 12th**—A Cynical Hope

**May 17th** – *The Struggle for Hope*

**June 14th** – *Deepening Hope*

**July 12th** – *Deepening Hope—Part Deux*

**August 9th** – *Hope Arriving*

### *Community Happenings*

#### **Day at Cheesequake**

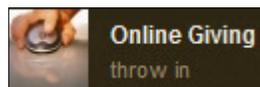
Join us Saturday May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 11am-3pm for a picnic and some fun at Cheesequake State park. For more information see <http://www.jacobswellnj.org/> or contact Manoj Thomas at [manoj.thomas@microsoft.com](mailto:manoj.thomas@microsoft.com).

#### **Cynical Hope—Arts get together**

The arts community at Jacob's Well will be working together in June on a collaborative painting. Sign-ups at the information table.

### *Jacob's Well Giving*

You can contribute to our mission here at Jacob's Well online at [www.JacobsWellNJ.org](http://www.JacobsWellNJ.org). Click the "Online Giving" button on the bottom right side of the page where it says "throw in." Of course you can always give on Sundays by placing something in one of the silver paint buckets at the back of the room and at the information table.



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